**Great Catholic Writers: Augustine and Aquinas**

Saint Augustine of Hippo and Saint Thomas Aquinas stand as not only two of the greatest theologians in the history of the Church, but as two of the most brilliant thinkers in the history of the world. Their influence on Catholic thought is virtually immeasurable: everyone who has come after them has been impacted and shaped by their writings.

Saint Augustine

Saint Augustine was born in North Africa in 354 to a pagan father and Catholic mother – a woman we know today as Saint Monica. Augustine benefitted from a good education, and developed a love for intellectual pursuits at a young age, particularly inspired by the writings of Cicero. In his late teens, Augustine left home to continue his studies, carrying with him nothing of the faith of his mother. As he pursued a career as a teacher and tutor, Augustine entered into several illegitimate relationships with concubines and mistresses, even being married (civilly) at one point. Additionally, he became involved with a sect of thinkers known as the Manicheans, who held a dualistic view of reality, in which the material world was considered evil, and the spiritual realm viewed as good.

Around the age of 30, Augustine traveled to Rome to attempt to start his own school. When his efforts failed, Augustine tried his hand in Milan. His time in Milan was a turning point in his life. It was here that Augustine came under the influence of the great Saint Ambrose, bishop of Milan. Augustine found in Ambrose a man of considerable intellect, and a man of deep faith in Jesus Christ and His Church. Around this time, Augustine also read *The Life of Saint Anthony*, a spiritual biography of Anthony of the Desert composed by Saint Athanasius. While reflecting on his reading of the life of the Egyptian saint, Augustine heard the voice of a small child saying *tolle lege*, *tolle lege*: “take and read, take and read.” Augustine opened a bible, and it fell to a passage from Saint Paul’s Letter to the Romans: “…let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (Romans 13:13-14). God spoke to his heart. Augustine abandoned his life of sexual immorality, and was baptized by Ambrose in 387. The ceaseless prayers and example of his mother, Monica, played a huge part in Augustine’s conversion!

At the age of 37, Augustine was ordained a priest; five years after that, he became bishop of Hippo in North Africa. He was a gifted preacher, writer, and defender of the faith. His sermons (numbering many volumes) come down to us today, and continue to speak us in our time as they did to Christians of his own day. He fought several heresies and worked to articulate and communicate the Catholic faith in countless ways.

Among his greatest writings are (1) *The Confessions*, a spiritual autobiography detailing his conversion to the Catholic faith; (2) *The City of God*, an extended discussion of how a Christian is to live as a member of the “city of God” while in this world; and (3) *On the Holy Trinity*, a brilliant exposition of the central mystery of the faith.

Saint Augustine died at age 76 on August 28 (now his feast day), in the year 430.

(Biographical material used is drawn from an excellent short work by Taylor Marshall: *Saint Augustine in 50 Pages*, Irving, TX: Saint John Press, 2014, online edition. The text can be downloaded for free by registering for Dr. Marshall’s webpage at taylormarshall.com).

Saint Thomas Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas was born in 1225 in a castle near Aquino, Italy, to noble parents (a count and countess). From early on, his parents envisioned that Thomas would become the Abbot (head monk) of the great Monte Cassino Monastery, a Benedictine monastery established by Saint Benedict himself. His parents’ motives were not primarily religious. To be abbot of Monte Cassino at this time was a position of great prestige and involved considerable secular influence and power. At the young age of five, Thomas began attending the monastery school. When Thomas was around the age of fourteen, a political conflict erupted between Emperor Frederick II (related to the Aquino family) and the pope, so Thomas’ parents sent him away to the University of Naples.

At Naples, Thomas came into contact with a man named John of Saint Julian. John was a member of the newly established Dominican Order (officially known as the “Order of Preachers”), which had been founded by Dominic de Guzman about ten years before Thomas’ birth. Thomas was immediately drawn to the life of the Dominicans: they embraced a radical life of poverty (often walking barefoot and even begging for food) and committed themselves to preaching and teaching. At age 19, Thomas announced to his family that he desired to be, not a Benedictine monk, but a Dominican friar.

Not surprisingly, his parents were greatly displeased with Thomas’ desire. The Benedictines were a nearly 800-year-old order with an established tradition and history, and a position as the abbot of Monte Cassino would bring honor, prestige, and power to Thomas and his family. Why did he wish to throw in his lot with a newly established group of poor beggars? Thomas, however, was unshakeable in his resolve. His mother, however, would not give in so easily. When Thomas departed from home to pursue his vocation as a Dominican, she sent his brothers to go and kidnap him. They locked Thomas in a room within the family castle.

His mother hoped this arrangement would shake Thomas’ resolve. His family even had a prostitute brought to the castle and sent her into the room to try and seduce Thomas. Thomas, however, drove her away with fire from the fireplace and traced the Sign of the Cross on the wall. Two angels appeared to Thomas and girded him with a cord of chastity: from this time forward, Thomas never again struggled with lustful thoughts or temptations to unchastity.

His mother held Thomas for two years. Over time, she saw that Thomas could not be broken. She finally yielded to Thomas’ wishes. However, not wishing to acknowledge her consent, she arranged to have Thomas “escape” through the window.

Thomas joined the Dominican Order and eventually became Master of Theology at the University of Paris. In addition to his incomparable ability as a philosopher and theologian, Thomas was also a man of deep prayer and great virtue, with a particular love for the Mass and the Eucharist.

Like Saint Augustine, Thomas’ influence is truly immeasurable. His theology has a central place in Catholic teaching and thought to this day. His greatest work is the *Summa Theologiae* (“Summary of Theology”), an immense work which moves step by step through nearly all the essentials of the Catholic faith. I say *nearly* because the work is unfinished. In 1273, while celebrating Mass on the Feast of Saint Nicholas (December 6), Thomas had a mystical experience. From that time forward, Thomas ceased dictating or writing any further. He told his secretary (who was pleading with Thomas to finish the *Summa*): “Reginald, I cannot, because all that I have written seems like straw to me” (Marshall, p. 6). Amazing words from a man who is arguably the greatest theologian in the history of the Church. All theology pales in comparison to the infinite greatness of God!

We will close with the words of Pope Pius XI:

We so approve of the tributes paid to his almost divine brilliance that we believe Thomas should be called not only Angelic but Common or Universal Doctor of the Church. As innumerable documents of every kind attest, the Church has adopted his doctrine for her own.… It is no wonder that the Church has made this light her own and has adorned herself with it, and has illustrated her immortal doctrine with it … It is no wonder that all the popes have vied with one another in exalting him, proposing him, inculcating him, as a model, master, doctor, patron and protector of all schools (Pope Pius XI, *Studiorum Ducem*, 11, *Papal Encyclicals Online*).

(Biographical material used is drawn from another excellent short work by Taylor Marshall: Thomas Aquinas in 50 Pages, Irving, TX: Saint John Press, 2014, online edition. The text can also be downloaded from Dr. Marshall’s website ([www.taylormarshall.com](http://www.taylormarshall.com)).